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EYEWITNESS

EDITH BALAS, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

I was born on 20 June 1929 in Cluj, the leading city of Northern Transylvania At the time of my birth Cluj was in Romania, but from 1940 to 1944 it was in Hungary It was an excellent place to grow up There was a handsome Gothic cathedral in the central square with an imposing equestrian sculpture of King Matthias of Hungary There was an opera house, a symphony orchestra, a medical school, a major university, an important library, botanical gardens, skating rinks, and excellent ski slopes close by My parents were hard-working: my mother had a workshop where she made artificial flowers, and my father sold my mother's wares My mother was very ambitious for me and made sure I had a good education The Jewish *gymnasium* was excellent, and I had private lessons in violin, French, German, and gymnastics I also had a circle of friends and a social life (much of it between the acts in the opera house). The opera house was only a block away from my home, and I started going there when I was seven years old. Although we were far from rich, I was an only child and had everything a child could want. My world was rather sheltered. I was aware that Jews were sometimes beaten up, and occasionally I saw ugly caricatures of Jews in the press, but I had no firsthand experience of anti-Semitism

My happy adolescence suddenly came to an end during a period of 15 days.

On 19 March 1944, Germany occupied Hungary After that, everything happened very quickly. Hitler's Final Solution had now caught up with us My family was ordered to leave our city apartment, and we were given a very small place, so crowded with our belongings that it resembled a warehouse The yellow star was introduced to identify us We refrained from walking in the street for fear of being attacked or ridiculed My school, the Jewish lyceum, where I was just finishing the fourth year of junior high, was closed

My first encounter with the Germans was fairly benign A soldier came to our courtyard. I was not wearing my yellow star at the time because I was not in the street, and a neighbor introduced me to him. I was well-built, almost 15 years old, and rather good-looking. At first the encounter seemed civilized; however, the soldier gave me a secret sign for an 'invitation', which I understood I was frightened because I imagined all that could happen to me during the rest of the war. I wrote about the incident to my friend Gyuri Mandula, who was in

Budapest His reply was very thoughtful. He wrote that we were in the midst of war, and I should know that whatever happened, he would be there for me He indeed showed his devotion during and after the war, writing me long letters every day When I was already in the first camp, the brick factory in Cluj, he arranged for a package of food to reach me

The whole Jewish community in Cluj was in a panic There were rumors of forced relocation to Kenyérmező in Western Hungary, where everyone would have to work in the fields A few people tried to escape across the border into Romania Some succeeded, others were caught and jailed A friend of my father who was an engraver and typographer talked about producing forged papers for us, but his workshop was requisitioned before he could do anything A nice neighbor, a young man who had dated my aunt Irene, offered to hide me in his parents' village, but I would not consider separating from my family The woman who taught me French and German, a dear old Swiss lady whom I called Aunt Madi, committed suicide along with her Jewish husband to avoid what was coming They hanged themselves Aunt Madi had lived in beautiful surroundings She knew I loved pretty things, so for Christmas she embroidered a corner of a handkerchief for me in petit point. She was not young, and the task must have tired her eyes Every pretty handkerchief I see reminds me of her

In late May the Hungarian *gendarmes*, wearing their characteristic hats decorated with rooster's feathers, took us on a truck to the local brick factory The whole Jewish population of the city was gathered there Each family was given a 5 x 5 meter unit, part of a shack that was used to dry the brick. It had a roof over the dusty earth, but no walls For privacy, we partitioned the space with sheets and covers Everything else was communal The situation could have deteriorated quickly; however, we did not stay there long While we were in the camp my father was interrogated to produce the jewelry and gold he had allegedly hidden We didn't understand why was he chosen – my parents were hard-working people and we were not rich He was taken to a small office building that was constantly surrounded by bystanders and relatives of those who were being interrogated I could hear the blows my father got as he was beaten. He was brave: he did not scream as other people did, and he did not reveal the whereabouts of the jewelry we had left with a 'nice' neighbor (who never returned it after the war, claiming that the Russians took it). When he got out, we bandaged the sole of his foot with a cold compress Fortunately, his foot had recovered by the time we were taken to the cattle cars He minimized the whole cruel incident

My best friend and classmate, Edith Zoltán, came alone to this improvised camp, her mother, a Christian Hungarian, having stayed behind in the hope of arranging her release. Her father and her brother were already serving in a forced labor unit in Hungary Edith later perished in Auschwitz. She was a talented pianist, and whenever I hear Weber's 'Invitation to the Dance', a piece she played in her last performance, I am reminded of her and it hurts. Other friends, Tuli Israel and her brother Robert, also came alone. They had recently lost their father, and their mother, who was paralyzed, had been taken to a hospital The mother survived the war, but her exceptionally beautiful and intelligent children perished. Out of 52 girls in my class, only five survived the deportation.

I lost almost everyone I knew – most of my relatives, childhood friends, my teachers, my parents' friends, casual acquaintances. My whole familiar world disappeared. It was painful then and it is painful now In my dreams, and even at times when I'm awake, images of vanished

people just pop up as they were in life It hurts. I feel wounded, and the wound instead of healing grows bigger and bigger Perhaps it's because as one gets older, earlier life becomes more important

The deportation came

A locomotive and cars that had been used to transport cattle pulled into the courtyard of the brick factory We were told that we could take only a few belongings After about 70 of us had been shoved into a cattle car we were given some water and a bucket and the space was sealed. For four days and nights we travelled together, most of us strangers to each other There was a terrible stench (human needs could not be postponed), no privacy, inconsolably crying children, and no place to stretch out We did not know how long the trip would take. It became clear to us that the train had left Hungary when through the small window we saw 'Krakow' written on a station We were in Poland. Where were they taking us? A shipment of sheep was in a neighboring train in the station I thought that their bleating was the sound of children crying My imagination went berserk.

Auschwitz-Birkenau

We reached our destination in the middle of the night It was Auschwitz-Birkenau From the little window of the cattle car we saw four huge square chimneys with blazing fires, and we smelled burnt flesh I remembered that one of my teachers, Gizi Deutsch, had told us that gas chambers were used to execute Jews Recalling that, I understood that this was our final stop. We would be killed The three of us, mother, father and I, embraced each other I cried silently, and said good-bye The doors of the wagon were opened, and we were ordered to make our way along a ramp to the platform of the station The pandemonium was indescribable

A man in a striped inmate's uniform asked my father in Yiddish whose child I was My father answered: 'She is mine'

'How old is she?' asked the inmate

'Fourteen', my father replied

'Sixteen', said the man and left. My father told me: 'If asked, you should say that you are sixteen'. Then he disappeared in the confusion

I stayed with my mother and my aunt Irene Soon, we faced a small group of SS officers who made a selection Men and women were separated Old women, children, and mothers who refused to give up their children (as they were often asked to do) were placed in a separate column As I later found out, they were taken at once to the gas chambers, killed, and cremated. The smell of burned flesh was pervasive Women who appeared fit for work were assigned to a different column Men were also selected that way: right or left, some condemned to slavery, others to death

When I came before the SS officer, I was asked how old I was I said: 'Sixteen' and found myself in the group which was destined to live That was the first of my lucky breaks. At the time, however, we didn't realize it – we still expected to be killed Our column was advancing toward

a huge open fire I couldn't see what was happening before us, but I learned later that that particular fire was used when the crematoriums were overflowing. People were shot at the edge of the fire and burned. As we marched forward, some women were crying; others were quietly resigned. Then, not far from the fire, the column made a sharp left turn. We entered a large grey building, where we were ordered to take off all our clothing and shoes. Our heads were shaved, and we stood there naked, awaiting our destiny. We then entered the shower room. I waited for the gas to come – but water came instead.

Afterwards, we were disinfected with a strong solution that burned on the pubic area, the freshly shaved head, and the underarms. Somehow I managed to keep the ski-boots I was wearing when we got off the train. We had thought they would help me working in the fields in Hungary. I stood there naked and shivering for a while, then a rag was thrown to me, which I was supposed to put on. It was a long, grey, silky dress with at least a hundred little red buttons and pleats. The pleats contained lice eggs. When my mother showed the supervisors the clusters of eggs, they told her that at least they were dead eggs. That was all I had to wear for almost three months. The long dress turned out to be useful. It got shorter and shorter as time went by, especially when I got dysentery and I used little pieces from the hem for hygienic purposes.

In the morning, we were ordered out to the courtyard. A uniformed SS woman appeared, shouted, and ordered us to stand in rows of five. This happened every day in the camp. She hit each of us on the top of our freshly shaved heads with a rubber stick. The gesture was probably meant as an initiation. The shock was immense. After days of travel in indescribable conditions, the constant fear of death, the treatment in the 'sauna' (as the disinfection place was known), the separation from my father, the grotesque image of myself with a shaved head, wearing that long silk dress and ski-boots, the sight of hundreds, perhaps thousands of women in rags and shaved heads, the electrified barbed wire around us, the stench of burning flesh – it was all too much to bear. I saw my violin teacher, Aunty Etelka Salamon. We started to laugh and laugh. It was a hysterical laugh, as otherwise we would have lost our minds. We probably did.

The place where we were taken was *Lager* (concentration camp unit) C, also called the camp of the Hungarian women. There were 36 wooden buildings – huts – arranged transversally. Originally, they had been designed for horses. Each hut had a number and a long brick heating stove – which, it turned out, was used only for the horses, not for us. There were no windows, but there was a small opening under the roof. Sanitation was crude. Two identical huts had taps with continuously running water, designated for hundreds of people. Two other huts had hundreds of holes for latrines, in two rows – again, designated for hundreds of people. Every day we had a few minutes to wash or to go to the toilet. At the entrance of each hut was a separate room for the *Blockälteste* or *Kapo* (the supervisor). She had luxurious arrangements, including a bed with fine linen, a colorful cover, lace, and curtains.

Most of the huts had bunks where the inmates had to stay unless there was an *Appell* (a counting of the inmates). The *Appell* was held twice a day, rain or shine, each time lasting five hours. We were ordered to stand five in a row. Our meager meal of soup and bread was given to us at the end of the afternoon *Appell*. In the morning we got so-called coffee.

The command of the camp was hierarchical. A woman inmate, the *Lagerälteste*, was the head of *Lager* C. She presided over the 36 *Blockälteste* or *Kapos*, each of whom resided in their own hut and were responsible for the discipline of approximately 1000 women. The *Kapos* were

originally from Slovakia and had been in the *Lager* for years. They spoke a little Hungarian, but the language of the commands and curses they threw at us was German. These women had lost their humanity, sold their souls to the devil, and most of them behaved like beasts. They had lived through difficult years, and large purple frostbite spots on their legs bore witness to their former suffering. Some of them had been taken to the German front, where they served as 'comfort women' to the army. They were bitter and angry with us. They would say: 'You were partying while we were already working here as slaves'. They made sure from our arrival that we knew where we were and what our fate would be. 'You came through the gate', they told us, 'but see the burning chimney – you will be leaving as smoke'. They gloried in their power over us, hitting us with rubber sticks whenever the whim took them.

In *Lager* C we were not registered or tattooed, because it was considered a transitional place. Women were selected and transported to a work camp. Those left behind and considered useless were sent to die.

For the first two days we did not have a place in a hut and had to sleep in the latrine. I spent those days overwhelmed by shock. I remember asking my mother to take me home. After that, when I had absorbed the shock, I never cried, or complained. I was trying to protect my mother from heartache. Self-discipline was one of the conditions of survival.

We were assigned to Block No. 20. That block was worse than many others because it did not have bunks. We all had to lie on the cold, naked earth without blankets or even straw. The block held about a thousand people. When we lay down on a 5 x 5 meter space for 20 of us, we formed something like a row of spoons. One could turn over only when the entire row turned. Most of the time my arm and leg became ice cold, and I couldn't do anything about it. When it rained, we had to stand up all night long, trying to avoid the water dripping from the leaky roof and the muddy puddles on the earthen floor. At five o'clock in the morning we stood in rows of five on *Appell*. This lasted about five hours, until the thousands of inmates in the whole Auschwitz-Birkenau camp had been counted. The same routine was repeated late in the afternoon. The chimneys of the crematoriums were continuously smoking. We could see through the fences that new transports of Jews were constantly arriving. It was rumored that Jews from all the occupied territories of Europe were brought to this extermination factory and, since the camp was filled, were taken directly to the crematoriums. The capacity of this killing factory was thousands a day.

A good thing happened to us. My cousin Eva from Hajdusoboszló spotted us among thousands during an *Appell* and managed to join us. She had arrived in Auschwitz with her mother, her younger sister, my grandmother, my grandmother's husband, and other aunts and cousins. She alone was selected for work; all the others were sent at once to the gas chamber. When Eva discovered what happened to those who were sent to the left, she was inconsolable. It was interesting that Eva, young as she was, was selected for work. When the Germans entered their city, her mother cropped her hair and put her in a long dress to make her look as unattractive as possible. Her strange appearance saved her life because she looked older than she really was. After her arrival she was assigned to Block No. 8 with girls of her own age. Soon after she joined us the hut was emptied, which meant that the girls had been sent to the gas chamber.

Eva and I were good companions for one another. She taught me Hungarian folksongs, which she sang in her fine voice, and I told her about the operas I had heard. This helped me to bring back some of the lost world that was so dear to me. I described the Cluj opera house: where the orchestra was located vis-à-vis the stage, the three rows of boxes, and the gallery where we always sat. Everything in the opera house was covered in red velvet and painted in gold. Every day during *Appell* I would reconstruct an opera performance for Eva. I recounted the libretto, trying to remember the sometimes complicated stories, the sequences of scenes, the specific characters. I described the colorful costumes and occasionally, with my less than perfect voice, attempted to reproduce some arias or melodies. And of course I mentioned the composers, even though I did not have much information about them. So we talked about major operas – *Madame Butterfly, Aida, Il Trovatore, Turandot, La Bohème, Lakmé, Rigoletto, The Barber of Seville, The Flying Dutchman, Faust, Tosca, Carmen, The Tales of Hoffmann* – as well as some ballets such as *Scheherazade* and *Coppélia*. When I ran out of fresh subjects, I started again from the beginning. The tragic stories made Eva cry. I remembered those stories much better then than I remember them today, and I have not seen some of the operas, such as *Lakmé*, ever since. I also told Eva about some funny things that had happened at the opera. For example, a huge Bulgarian singer who played Carmen insisted on dancing the habanera on a table. The table did not collapse, but she needed several people to push her onto the top of it. For *Aida* there were sometimes so few extras that in the long triumphal march the same people kept coming back again and again. One tenor wore high heels, and the supposedly fifteen-year-old Madame Butterfly was at least 60. I have to mention that after the war, as soon as she had an opportunity, Eva went to the Budapest opera house. Today, she and her wonderful family – two children and five grandchildren – are opera lovers, perhaps in some part thanks to me.

We also entertained ourselves by inventing recipes, even though neither of us had ever cooked. This virtual cooking seemed to alleviate our hunger.

Early in our stay, a *Blockälteste* stopped before us at an *Appell* and asked me how old I was. I said I was sixteen. She seemed to be interested in me, though I had no idea why. I found out later that she was looking for a servant girl. When she learned that I was with my mother she quickly moved away. Those servant girls had privileged situations. They enjoyed better food, slept in the *Blockälteste's* room, and even exercised power over other inmates. They became corrupted on many levels, physically and psychologically. I was lucky that she left me alone.

Every moment of my existence was physically and psychologically miserable. There was no relief in sight. No news reached us. We did not know that the advancing Russian army was not far away. Each day was as dreary as the next. I don't remember a single sunny day in Auschwitz. Humiliation, terrible hunger, and lack of sleep were our daily lot. Our food for the day consisted of a piece of bread, a black liquid called 'coffee', and one bowl of soup for the five people in each row. The soup contained oats and something green that we identified as grass. There was sand in it. It was so bad that, although we were starving, Eva was unable to swallow it. We forced her to eat, knowing that unless she did she would have no chance of surviving. She had to hold her nose in order to swallow that horrible stuff. After eating it, she got a rash on her body.

I discovered in myself a life force, a conviction that evidently distinguished me from many of my fellow Auschwitz inmates. Most of them were realistic and could not see a way out, a prospect of survival. That conviction was reinforced by our actual situation, the admonishments of the *Kapos*, the selections, and the closeness of the chimneys. My thoughtless naiveté and innate

optimism helped me to stand strong and try to absorb the shocks. I had had a good life at home. I had loving parents. I had been a good student, popular among my peers. I had just started in life and had just become a woman, having had my period only once before the deportation. I thought I had my whole life before me. It was impossible to think that I could die.

In the hut where a thousand bodies were squeezed together, two or three women went mad every night. Next morning they were taken away. Their fate was sealed.

To try to improve our situation, I decided to have an audience with the *Blockälteste* of the block next to ours, the one who had wanted to recruit me as a servant. I considered her an acquaintance. Since my German was weak, I started to rehearse my speech. I planned to say that there were six of us (I included a classmate, Eva Lovinger, and her mother) who would like to move to the *Blockälteste*'s hut, and would she please accept us? I was not going to mention our real motive: we wanted to have bunks. Although the inmates had to lie on the bunks all the time, this was a respite from standing in line for ten hours a day. I went to the usher and asked to see the *Blockälteste*. This was probably the first time anyone had wanted to speak to her boss. She let me in. I politely knocked on the door, entered the room, and began my speech. I was lucky that the *Kapo* was lying on the upper bunk. Her eyes dilated and for a moment she was so stunned that she remained paralyzed and speechless. Then she pulled a slipper from her foot and hurled it at me, cursing. By that time I was running as fast as I could and disappeared.

I learned from this incident that there was no possibility of communicating with the *Kapos*. No one could talk to those half-beasts. By serving the Germans, they had privileged lives. They had comfortable quarters, goodies, nice dresses, even jewelry. I learned later that they exchanged some of the food designated for the inmates, such as margarine and salami (which we never saw), for luxury items. They were also provided for by the 'Canadians', the male workers who unloaded the trains of the incoming Jews. Most of the *Blockälteste* had lovers among them, others slept with them for the 'goodies'. Those men trafficked in stolen food, selling it to the Polish free workers with whom they were in contact. Gold also changed hands. All of this was known to us.

Let me describe one of the most horrible things that ever happened to me. One night, while we were sleeping on the ground, a pail filled with urine that had been placed on a roof beam overturned right on top of my head. That torrent of urine was a terrible shock. I took off my dress and remained stark naked until morning. Only then did I have a chance to wash. My aunt Irene, a very kind and loving woman, washed my dress. I had to put it on wet for the *Appell*, where I shivered for five hours in the cold morning air of the Silesian 'summer'.

Another memorable event took place on my fifteenth birthday. That morning we were ordered to kneel for five hours instead of standing for the *Appell*. We heard that somebody had escaped or attempted to escape from Auschwitz, and that this was a collective punishment. We were not even told why we had to kneel.

The frequent selections were very frightening. There were two kinds of selection. One was to choose laborers to be shipped out to a work camp; the other was to eliminate the weak and send them to be exterminated. Even the first kind of selection was stressful because we did not want to be separated: we knew that separation would mean death for each of us. I remember one specific occasion when we were ordered to line up one by one along the wall of our hut. The hut had an entrance and an exit at opposite ends. The line started at the entrance and

advanced toward the exit We did not know what was happening at the end When we turned the corner toward the exit, we found ourselves facing a group of SS When it was my turn, an SS woman grabbed my arm and threw me back into the hut through the door I was saved So were the others in our group We once again had a lease on life, and we embraced each other for joy

When we heard news of an upcoming selection, my mother bought – with a piece of her bread – a piece of red wrapping paper from a coffee substitute called Franck Before the selection we smeared the red paper on our cheeks to give ourselves a healthy look Fortunately that worked, and we passed the selection

Another time, when I saw the selection approaching our hut, I observed a different pattern The ones selected were enclosed in a human chain of women holding hands, meant to form a separation wall I asked some friends from outside our unit to stay close by the chain with a pail and broom, mimicking a cleaning task force This turned out to be a good idea because I alone was selected from our group Although my mother had been told of our plan, she got so upset that she protested and cried She was beaten In the meantime I was able to grab a broom from my friends who were standing nearby, sneak outside the chain, and, a little later, rejoin our group in the hut I knew I was doing a very dangerous thing and could be sent to my death if caught; however, I also knew that I would not survive without my group, especially my mother We were reunited, and mother did not complain about the pain from her beating

My mother was kind and strong in her gentle way, and her presence made me feel more secure She was equally kind to Eva Everyone thought that we were both her daughters There were limits, however, to what we could do for one another For example, it was impossible to share our food with one another I could not accept food from my mother nor could she expect me to give her any of mine It was an unspoken agreement between us We had equal chances of living or dying

One night I witnessed a tragic event A woman delivered a healthy child She gave birth on the top of a long brick structure, which was part of the stove for the horses and which, for unknown reasons, was off limits for us She had somehow managed to conceal her pregnancy The delivery had to be very quiet, and the only light came filtered from outside The *Kapo* was not aware of the birth, but the baby could not be hidden for long, and in the morning it was taken away The unfortunate mother was inconsolable We all were sorry for her

On one occasion we were taken to be disinfected and finally had a hot shower Coming out naked from the shower room, we went through a strange routine Two German soldiers stood facing each other: one held a walking stick with which he grabbed my neck and made me bend over; the other then sprayed disinfectant in my behind with a huge pump One can imagine my humiliation The whole process was accomplished quickly and efficiently, like a well-oiled factory I wondered why those solders were there doing that peculiar job instead of fighting at the front Obviously, the Germans at that time considered the extermination and humiliation of Jews more important

On my way back to *Lager* C, I met Bobby, a friend of mine from Cluj He was the only male acquaintance I met during the whole period of my imprisonment He was wearing the striped prisoner's garb, but looked healthy I found out later that he played clarinet in the camp orchestra

I greeted him with joy: 'Bobby!' He looked at me, confused, obviously unable to recognize me with my shaved head, long rag-dress, and ski-boots. I was also emaciated from dysentery. Finally, after several seconds, he said in a shocked voice: 'Edith, is it you?' The whole scene lasted only a moment, then my column had to move on. It was an emotionally trying encounter, and my feeling of sadness lasted a long time. Bobby happened to be the brother of my future husband, Egon. Unfortunately he did not survive the evacuation from Auschwitz in the winter in January 1945. He suffered emphysema from being forced to play the clarinet constantly, and he could not withstand the brutal march in the snow.

An acquaintance from the neighboring hut, which had bunks, told me about an empty space where I could spend a night. Although I was not permitted to leave my hut, I took the risk and found a place on the upper deck of the three-tiered bunk. I was looking forward to a night's sleep.

I didn't get it. This turned out to be the terrible night of 2 to 3 August 1944, when thousands of Gypsy families were sent to the crematoriums to be killed. Since I was on the upper deck of the bunk and there was a small opening between the wall of the building and the roof, I was able to see them being taken to their deaths. They were in large trucks lined up on the road along *Lager* C. The trucks stopped and advanced, stopped and advanced, all night long. They were jammed with people of all ages, crying, gesticulating, and filling the night with loud supplications. They had been in the camp for a long time and obviously knew what was going to happen to them. The horrible scene was illuminated intermittently with moving spotlights.

Over the years my sorrow for these helpless victims has mingled with my pain for the many members of my family – grandparents, aunts, uncles, and young cousins – who suffered the same fate. I have often wondered whether someone witnessed them going to their deaths in the same way that I witnessed the departure of the Gypsies. Since then I have had a special place in my heart for the Gypsies, and occasionally in my art history classes I spend time discussing their importance for European music and costume design. The slaughter happened more than 60 years ago, and it may well be that I am the only living eyewitness to that sad event.

Our group was selected again, this time for work. We were taken to be disinfected and were given striped uniforms, underpants, and wooden shoes. Because I knew we were going to get shoes, I left my ski-boots with an acquaintance who stayed behind in *Lager* C. That may have been a big mistake – I could have used them later on when I had to work all day in the snow. But I might not have been allowed to keep them.

On the night of 11 August we were taken to *Lager* B, where we had a wooden platform to sleep on and covers. That was the first comfortable night we had spent since our deportation. However, a terrible thing happened. The next day we were ordered to take off all our clothes and stand in line. Hundreds of women stood naked on the courtyard of the camp. We knew what the order meant. We were doomed. Everyone reacted differently: some became hysterical, others wept in silence, others prayed, many were resigned. I was frightened. In the camp, one could commit suicide simply by touching the electrified wire, and everyone considered that at one time or another. I saw people die that way. The prospect of dying in the gas chamber was terrifying – and now it seemed as though it was about to happen.

It didn't. We were taken, not to the crematorium, but to be disinfected again, then we were once again given striped cotton dresses, underpants, and wooden shoes. We were directed to the train platform, where each of us got a large piece of bread, margarine, and water, and were loaded into cattle cars. We left Auschwitz on 12 August 1944. We were together, relieved that we had escaped the shadows of the crematoriums. Our destination was unknown, but we thought that nothing that awaited us could be as bad as Auschwitz. We were wrong again.

Unterlüß

In the cattle car everyone had a place to lie down and we were not terribly hungry or thirsty. Compared to life at Auschwitz, the journey was relatively pleasant. We arrived in a small *Lager* located in the middle of a large forest. The place was called Unterlüß. There were about 950 women there, housed in two huts with two-level bunks, straw mattresses, and covers. The number on my cotton dress was 463, but I don't recall ever being registered. Our first meals were wonderful compared to what we had had before. The soup contained potatoes and a sort of turnip grown for cattle feed, but it was edible and had a better consistency than the Auschwitz soup. A nice woman, an inmate who spoke flawless German, was named *Lagerälteste*. She was friendly with my mother and offered to assign one of us to the kitchen. My mother suggested Irene. She turned out to be a lifesaver, often stealing raw vegetables for us so that we had additional food. Irene gained weight and was in better physical condition than before.

This camp was a work camp, not an extermination camp like Auschwitz. We worked outdoors from six in the morning to six in the evening, with a half-hour break. When we returned from work at night we were given an individual bowl of soup and a piece of bread. The first job, breaking stones in a quarry, was difficult, and we weren't very productive. The soldiers who watched us didn't care about that, but standing in the summer sun with no shade in sight was hard. Later, we cut down small pine trees in two forests, a so-called 'green forest' and a 'black forest'. The black forest was black because there had been a fire and acres and acres of trees were burned. Our job was to cut down the mutilated trees that had survived the fire and burn them. I became an expert woodcutter.

As the temperature dropped and late autumn arrived, we suffered terribly from the cold in our cotton dresses. As we had no overcoats, we wore thick paper from cement sacks under our dresses. My ears became infected, and I spent several days in the small infirmary. Irene fed me during the day with leftover soup originally cooked for the SS. I don't know how she managed to do that – it was supposed to be given to their ferocious German shepherd dogs – but it gave me a badly needed lift. Unfortunately, she was caught with stolen vegetables and thrown out of the kitchen. The nice *Lagerälteste* was also replaced with a clique of aggressive women, sisters from Ungvar in Northern Hungary. They didn't harm us, but they held all the positions in the camp and took advantage of it.

I became sick again, this time with typhus. I had a low temperature in the morning that climbed very high in the evening. I was unable to eat my portion of soup or the bread. Irene saved my life. She chose to work the night shift at the ammunition factory, where the Germans gave a cup of milk to each of the inmates. The environment was so poisonous that her hair and dress became orange-yellow. Instead of drinking her milk, she brought it to me. It was the only

thing I could swallow I got better. Soon after, in early January, I was forced to go out and cut wood in temperatures around minus 20° C. I survived that challenge as well.

The only time we saw German civilians was when we were taken for work near the village and had to march through it. We met a mother and a small child who could not have been more than four. The mother urged her to throw stones at us. The girl complied. That was the only day I cried (though I didn't let anyone see me doing it). I was cold and hungry, and my past, my home, seemed like only a faint illusion.

I had scabies, which was cured in the infirmary with an ointment. I also had a few lice. Every morning I took off the little rag, only a few inches wide, that was my 'underwear' and handed it to my mother, who killed the lice. That little ritual, which showed care and affection, was a tremendous help. That was the only pampering I had during this period.

Minor illnesses were tolerated in the camp; however, if someone became very sick, she was sent to nearby Bergen-Belsen to be 'cured'. At least that was the story we were told.

I met two good Germans in the camp. One was an infirmary worker, a young man. Some of us had lesions from scurvy, caused by a lack of vitamin C. We were told to line up in the infirmary. We thought we were going to get some ointment, but the young man wanted to give us injections. Knowing the ways of the SS, we suspected the worst and refused the injections. In order to convince us that the ampoules contained only vitamin C, not poison, the young man injected himself. That was a great humanitarian gesture. We let him inject us, and the lesions healed. I am still grateful to that anonymous young man.

The commander of the camp at Unterlüß was a young SS woman, beautiful but cruel. It was said that she had been an equestrian circus performer in civilian life. We called her 'The Black' because she had black hair and blue eyes. She was there every dawn when we were enrolled for work. She was the one who, even though my ear was bandaged, pulled me out of the infirmary and made me go to work. She was the one who, when Eva and I happened to go to the courtyard where the kitchen was and the SS were quartered, incited two German shepherd dogs to attack us. Although the dogs jumped on us and frightened us badly, they didn't bite. Instead 'The Black' hit us with her rubber stick. She struck me below my eye, leaving a permanent scar. Eva became pathologically afraid of dogs: even today, she cannot go to a park where people are walking dogs.

The work became harder and harder. At this point we were removing the branches of large pine trees that Russian prisoners had cut down. We saw the Russians from a distance. We were also supposed to lift the large trunks, but we didn't get very far with that. We also constructed roads. The best job was working in the ammunition factory because there we were sheltered from the cold. Unfortunately, every morning the column that went to the ammunition factory was filled with aggressive women with whom we could not compete. We managed to work there only once or twice. As time went on, we received less and less food. Our daily ration of soup, made of beets, was very watery; however, we still had a piece of bread.

One day in early March* the camp was declared 'war territory' and we did not go to work. It was a beautiful morning, and we sat on the ground by the wall of the hut, killing the millions of fleas that infested our covers. Soon, we were treated to a spectacular fireworks display. The

*Correction: April

ammunition factory was bombed by the Allies, and the whole thing blew up. I wasn't the least bit afraid; on the contrary, I was thrilled at the damage to the German war machine, even if it meant that I was going to die with it What I enjoyed most was to see hundreds of Allied planes sparkling in the sun. That was probably the only pleasure I had in the camp It was a miracle that it happened on a day when the inmates didn't go to work We were saved again by chance.

A few days later the German civilian cook – the second good German I met in the camp – came into the hut and told us that the SS had fled We were ecstatic. Finally, we would be free! We had survived the war We could return home and resume our normal lives

Or so we thought. The next morning we experienced a huge disappointment Civilian armed guards came with trucks to take us away. The people of Unterlüß did not want a concentration camp in their midst when the Allies arrived They wanted to wash their hands off us. The civilian cook tried to save a girl (allegedly his lover) by telling her to flee into the forest She was shot in the leg and did not come with us. I don't know what happened to her

The cook did something that turned out to be a lifesaver for us He distributed the reserve potatoes from the cellar of the camp Each of us got five or six small potatoes At this time, toward the end of the war, nothing was more valuable than food, even for the Germans, and he could have sold the potatoes for a large profit He was an honest, good human being

The civilian guards ordered us to get on the truck and transported us to the nearby concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen. I remember passing through a town, Celle. We were unloaded at the gate of the camp and ordered to enter.

Bergen-Belsen and liberation

The situation in the camp was indescribable. There was no longer any organization or anyone of real authority. The guards stayed outside and their only job was to prevent us from leaving Inside, mountains of unburied corpses lay on the ground There was no drinking water – the water had been shut off – and no food distribution Typhoid and dysentery were rampant We were given half the floor of a hut, the other half of which was occupied by hundreds of sick women, many of them dying One of the symptoms of this type of typhoid (exantematic) is delirium when the fever is high. Many of the sick did not have the power to walk; they crawled Some of them tried to crawl on top of us; they couldn't distinguish an empty space from an occupied space The next day we found an empty one-person bunk on the third level, into which the four of us squeezed A miserable sick woman still tried to climb on us I had to peel her fingers off one by one to escape her It may sound like callous behavior on my part, but the whole situation was pure hell I passed by one of those mountains of dead people and saw a girl looking at me Her eyes were wide open, and I thought she was still alive. She was on the bottom of a heap of at least a hundred corpses There was no way I could have done anything for her, even if she had been alive To this day I remember that pair of eyes

Although we were emaciated, we weren't sick The potatoes the cook gave us provided some nourishment. Those few potatoes saved our lives

A few days later, on 15 March* 1945, British tanks entered the camp. The British soldiers opened the warehouses, from which we could take some bread, and turned on the main water lines. They also distributed cans of beans and meat, which we avidly consumed. This was a serious mistake: the food was too heavy for people who had been starving for months or years. In a little while we experienced terrible stomach aches. We all threw up; in my case, so violently that whole beans came out through my mouth and nose. Many people died as a result.

In the warehouse I noticed fur-lined coats, obviously destined for the SS officers. I also saw army tents. I figured that living in a tent would be a good way to escape the hellish huts, so with the help of Eva I built a tent in the courtyard of the camp, and we used the coats to cover ourselves up. We all had a good sleep. Others followed our example, and a 'tent village' was created of which I am proud to be the initiator. This village can be seen in photos of Bergen-Belsen taken at this time. A few days later we moved to an empty room of the former German headquarters.

Our group also succumbed to the typhoid. Fortunately, not all of us were equally sick. My mother was able to give Eva and me some water; then she fell ill herself. She also suffered from meningitis with a high fever, so that her ears started to ring. The ringing was with her for the rest of her life. Irene was the last and worst case. She lost her will to live. There was a rule in the camp that we knew very well: if you didn't go out to do your business, your life was finished. We forced her to try to get up and move. I remember the three of us physically pushing her. We finally succeeded, and she got better. There was a shower room near the place where we stayed, and we crawled there, unable to walk. At one point we weighed ourselves. I weighed 28 kilos (60 pounds), approximately half my former weight. My mother weighed exactly the same. We did not receive medical help of any kind. A Red Cross ambulance took two people at one time to the hospital, out of thousands. A doctor finally visited us and offered me a piece of chocolate. I was very angry with him because we didn't get medical help when we needed it, and I remember refusing the piece of chocolate. Perhaps, though, I had only the intention of refusing it – I couldn't resist chocolate.

Out of 950 inmates who came to Bergen-Belsen from Unterlüß, only 275 survived – without anyone trying to kill us. Typhus, dysentery, lack of food and water, and the heavy meal, were enough to snuff out the life of debilitated bodies.

The war was still raging, and this calamity was a tremendous burden on the British army. We heard (though I am unable to document this) that several British soldiers died after entering the typhoid-infested environment. We found out later that the whole camp was mined and that the Hungarian troops guarding it were supposed to blow it up. They didn't do that. The survivors were deloused and evacuated, the dead were buried in mass graves, and the camp was destroyed.

We were transported to a cluster of barracks recently abandoned by the German army. We had all the basic necessities there; each of us also received a dress and a pair of shoes. Every day we felt better. Some of the women were transported to Sweden for physical rehabilitation, but we didn't sign up for this. The large building complex where we were housed was enclosed by a fence, because we were under quarantine. After a while, we ventured out through holes in the fence to collect mushrooms in the woods. I was a talented mushroom gatherer: while the others only found one or two mushrooms, my container was completely filled. Porcini mushrooms, one of the best varieties of wild mushroom, were in season. We exchanged the mushrooms for other kinds of food. I was called 'The Mushroom Girl'. My knack for careful observation was useful in my career as an art historian in later life.

*Correction: April

We were anxious to go home, but we were in northern Germany, near Celle, and no transportation was immediately available because so many railways had been destroyed in the war. We had no books, newspapers, or any form of entertainment Eva and I volunteered to work in a laundry for the British army One of the incentives was that the lunch was a bit better than in the complex; another was that they promised us a dress and shoes (which never materialized). We weren't paid either. Still it felt good to help the British army and to keep ourselves occupied. I always forget to mention in my vita that for four months I was a laundress.

An organization in the camp – probably a Zionist organization – called us to a meeting, where people could express their preferences as to where they would like to go and make their home The Zionist organization proposed that everyone go to Palestine We were against that, since we hoped to meet my father in Cluj, which was once again part of Romania Eva also hoped to see her father, who has been sent to a labor battalion in the Ukraine

During the summer we heard there was a movie theater in the camp. When Eva and I ventured there, it was completely filled up and the movie was about the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, filmed by English soldiers That was not exactly the kind of entertainment we dreamed about. The next time, all four of us went The place was packed. We had a surprise: there was no movie; instead, the violinist Yehudi Menuhin, accompanied by his sister Hephzibah, was going to play He began with a sonata by Johann Sebastian Bach. It was wonderful, but the audience lacked the musical sophistication to appreciate it Everybody left, leaving only the four of us and two British soldiers Menuhin, however, seemed unperturbed and treated us to a private recital for two hours It was the experience of a lifetime In 1967, when I heard Menuhin play in San Francisco, I thought to get in touch with him and tell him that I was among the tiny audience at the camp, but somehow I never got round to it

Early in September a group of people who had valuable wrist-watches banded together and bought the services of a locomotive engineer, who provided a locomotive and three passenger cars, to take those of us who wanted to go home to Romania The watches had been unearthed in front of the building in the Bergen-Belsen camp where the German headquarters had been – the very place where we had been lying sick We did not know anything about the find Our quarters in the building were completely empty, except for a huge box filled with tiny watch-wheels. An acquaintance who visited us took a few and sold them for good money in Cluj It must have been German loot, worth a fortune, but to us it meant nothing We did not help pay for the trip – we did not have watches and did not know that the tiny wheels were valuable

Our journey lasted about three weeks The trip was rather pleasant, the weather was fine, and we were excited to be going home. Our train was ignored in the stations; therefore, we could advance only slowly Hunger wasn't a problem because the Red Cross gave us food at the railway stations Eva and I slept in a net designed to hold luggage It wasn't a very comfortable place because there was an iron bar in the middle of the net, but by this time we weren't too choosy about our sleeping arrangements. As we travelled I saw the destruction that had befallen such German cities as Hannover and Frankfurt. Sometimes our train crossed a bridge that was little more than a skeleton of the bridge, without railings If one looked down, there was the river below. These bridges seemed frighteningly unstable

When we arrived in Budapest I learned that my father had survived the concentration camp. We were very happy Sadly, we also learned that Eva's father had been shot in the Ukraine by the Russian army. They considered him as an enemy soldier. Eva was devastated, inconsolable. She had no immediate family – her mother, father, and sister were all dead. She had two uncles in Budapest, however, so she decided to stay there. She was also reluctant to come to Romania, which would be a strange new language territory for her. As my mother and I had no home, we couldn't offer her much apart from our love.

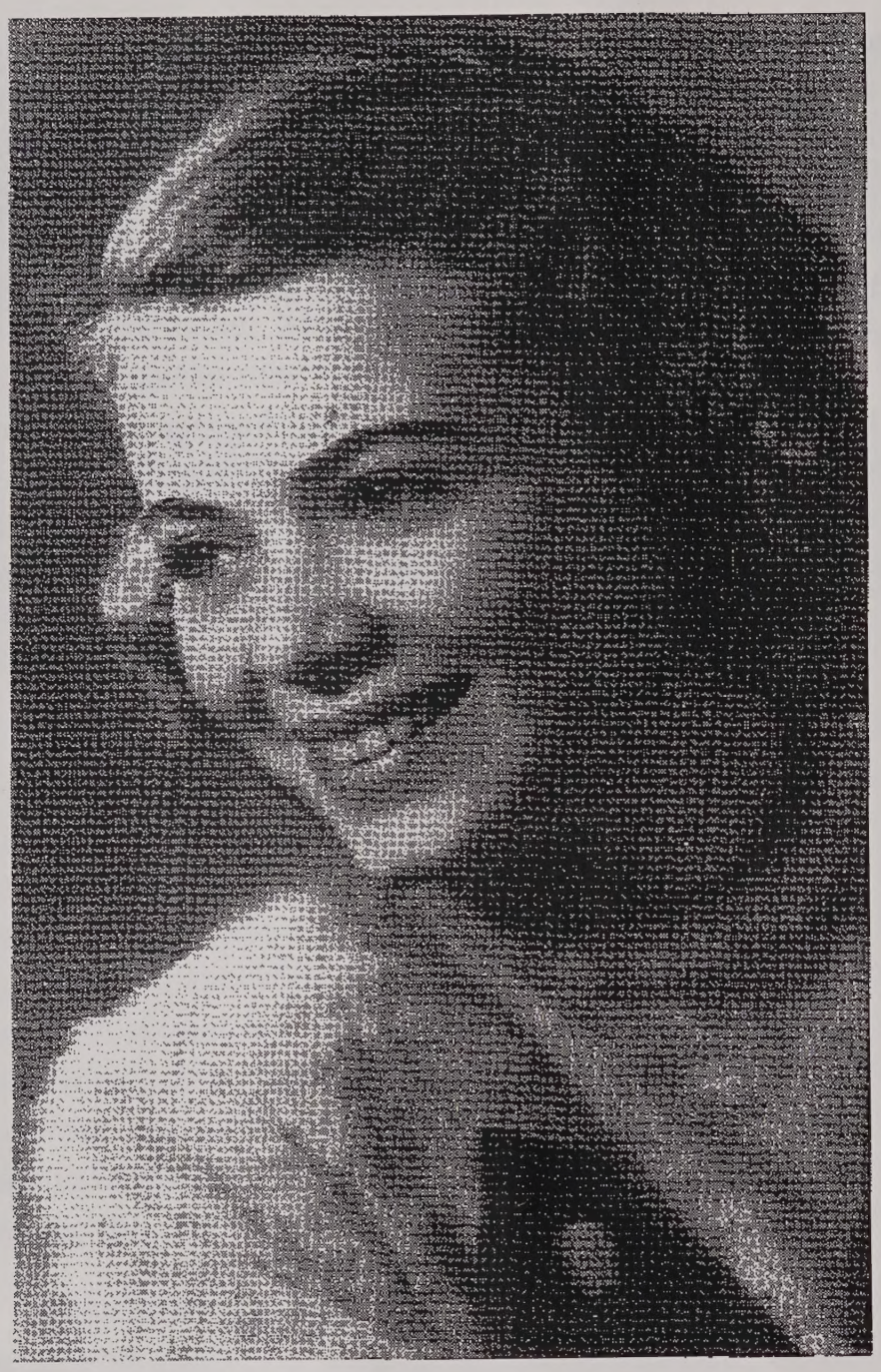
On 28 September 1945 we crossed the border into Romania. Our meager luggage was stolen. It had contained a present for my father: cigarettes, which we had been collecting for months. Nevertheless, our meeting with him was very joyful; he looked well and was of course happy to see us. Of the 15,000 Jews of Cluj, ours was one of only three families in which the mother, the father and one child had survived the concentration camps. That fact shows how lucky I was.

ADDENDUM

In Cluj Edith, by her maiden name Lovy, met her future husband, Egon Balas, also Jewish, who had joined the Hungarian communist party in 1942, worked in the underground resistance and survived in hiding after escaping from Nazi imprisonment. They married on 21 December 1948. Egon was posted to a diplomatic position in London and worked subsequently in the Romanian Foreign Ministry, before being arrested by the Romanian communist authorities and held for two years in solitary confinement. Released after the death of Stalin, he started a new life as an economist and mathematician. In 1966 Edith and Egon and their two daughters were allowed to leave Romania and settled in the United States. Egon went on to become Professor of Industrial Administration and Applied Mathematics and The Thomas Lord Professor of Operations Research at the Tepper School of Business at Carnegie Mellon University (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania). Edith studied Art History and became a professor of Art History at the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Carnegie Mellon University, her main areas of interest are Modern Art (1890–1960), Painting and Sculpture, and the Art of the Italian Renaissance. She is also Adjunct Professor of History of Art and Architecture at the University of Pittsburgh.

The chapter published above is an excerpt from Edith Balas's memoirs, Bird in Flight: Memoir of a Scholar and Survivor, *which she recently completed and which will be published by Carnegie Mellon University Press in early 2010. Egon Balas's memoirs were published in 2000 under the title* Will to Freedom: A Perilous Journey Through Fascism and Communism *(Syracuse University Press, paperback edition 2008).*

Rainer Schulze



Edith Balas at the age of 14

Edith Balas tells the amazing story of how this photograph survived her deportation to Auschwitz: Miklos Saphir my former teacher was in Auschwitz in a commando unit which sorted out all the things which the deportees brought with them One day he found himself facing a mountain of photos and probably out of compassion and frustration he kicked the mountain My photo jumped in front of him He took it and kept it. Obviously I reminded him of the good normal period of his life When I met him after the war he produced the photo and gave it to me Many years later we met in Mexico City and I presented to him my book on [the Romanian/French sculptor Constantin] Brancusi[1] which made him feel proud and pleased since he had started me in art history many years before

[1] Edith Balas *Brancusi and Romanian Folk Traditions* (East European Monographs Boulder CO distributed by Columbia University Press 1987; 2nd ed Ithaka NY: Carnegie Mellon University Press distributed by Cornell University 2006)